DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 367 024 CS 508 481

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TITLE Saying "Yes" for "No" and "No" for "Yes": A Chinese Rule.
PUB DATE 21 Nov 93
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (79th, Miami Beach, FL, November 18-21, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Ambiguity; *Chinese Culture; Classification; *Communication Research; *Cultural Context; Higher Education; Intercultural Communication; *Interpersonal Communication; Language Usage
IDENTIFIERS *Communication Behavior; *Indirect Speech

ABSTRACT

"Contrary-to-face-value" (CFV) messages, which can only be understood from a contextual instead of a text-based approach to communication, have caused many problems in communication between East Asians and North Americans. A typology of CFV communication, as identified in the Chinese culture, is proposed in this paper. Four forms of CFV communication are constructed on the basis of the following two dimensions of CFV communication: internal motivation (other-serving or self-serving) and external speech (saying "yes" for "no" or "no" for "yes"). Previous communication research has addressed the concepts behind other-serving CFV communication, although the self-serving CFV communication has been addressed in only a few studies. The typology proposed covers a wide range of CFV communication in a relatively parsimonious way. Though confusing to outsiders, each of the four forms can be justified from an insider's perspective. A table listing the four categories of CFV communication is included. Contains 12 references. (Author/RS)

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ED 367 024

Saying "Yes" for "No" and "No" for "Yes": A Chinese Rule

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Paper presented at the 1993 convention of
the Speech Communication Association
Miami, Florida
November 21, 1993

CS508481

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Abstract:

Saying "Yes" for "No" and "No" for "Yes":

A Chinese Rule

"Contrary-to-face-value" (CFV) messages, which can only be understood from a contextual instead of a text-based approach to communication, have caused many problems in communication between East Asians and North Americans. A typology of CFV communication, as identified in the Chinese culture, is proposed in this study. Four forms of CFV communication are constructed on the basis of the following two dimensions of CFV communication: internal motivation (other-serving or self-serving) and external speech (saying "yes" for "no" or "no" for "yes"). Though being confusing to outsiders, each of the four forms can be justified from an insider's perspective.

Saying "Yes" for "No" and "No" for "Yes": A Chinese Rule

A General Motors manager once expressed his frustration to the author's friend by saying, "I don't understand you Asians! You say 'no' when you are supposed to say 'yes' and say 'yes' when you are supposed to say 'no.'" Adopting a text-based encoding and decoding approach, North Americans are often confused by East Asians' "contrary-to-face-value" (CFV) verbal responses during interactions. On the other hand, East Asians expect their communication partners to be able to read between the lines or decode messages from a holistic, context-based perspective. They sometimes complain about the bold communication style adopted by North Americans.

As communication between East Asians and North Americans occurs more and more frequently, understanding of each other's communication rules becomes increasingly important. This paper intends to address why and in what situations Chinese are likely to adopt CFV communication. The term "contrary-to-the-face-value communication," or "CFV communication," as used in this study, refers to any communication in which what is said is the opposite of, or different from, what the speaker believes to be true or what is "logically" expected to say, with the intention of wanting or not wanting others to know the real purpose of communication.

As suggested in previous studies, a major difference between East Asian and North American cultures is the indirect versus direct mode of communication (e.g., Ting-Toomey, 1985,

1988; Yum, 1988). Ma (1992), based on literature review, summarizes "indirectness" as underplaying all matters of the heart, being non-assertive and non-argumentative, releasing very little information via coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message, assuming a nonconfrontational attitude toward conflicts, performing two types of illocutionary act at the same time, adopting avoidance styles in face negotiations, etc. (p. 269). "Directness," on the other hand, denotes displaying strong emotionality, vesting the mass of the information in the explicit code, adopting confrontational styles in conflict management, etc. (Ma, 1992, p. 269).

Both the indirect and direct modes of communication can be found in almost every culture. In Ghana, for example, "interactants employ various forms of verbal indirection to embellish their utterances, to draw other interactants' attention to relevant issues, to persuade them, to minimize social and/or communication tension, and to settle personal scores" (Obeng, 1994, p. 37). In the United States, men in a southwestern city reported significantly greater use of indirect forms of communication than women in talking about AIDS (Rudnick & Roth, 1989). Nurses were found to adopt indirect communication in "inappropriate-order" situations (Cunningham & Wilcox, 1985). However, Yum (1988) notes that the indirect mode is pervasive and often deliberate in East Asia, whereas the direct mode is a norm in North America (p. 384). In addition, indirect communication in East Asia has

been associated with harmony. In other words, indirect communication is preferred in East Asia to avoid direct confrontation and maintain social harmony. As Yum (1988) writes:

> Indirect communication helps to prevent the embarrassment of rejection by the other person or disagreement among partners, leaving the relationship and the face of each party intact. (p. 383)

A good example of indirect communication is the use of CFV messages by East Asians. North Americans, who are raised in an individualistic culture, tend to say "yes" or "no" to simply reflect their individual wishes. East Asians, being "interindividualistic" (e.g., Burgoon, 1992), usually make their decisions using "yes" or "no" based on the feelings of others. In other words, to say "yes" for "no" or "no" for "yes" is largely a reflection of the indirect approach to communication, through which undesirable interpersonal confrontation can be avoided. There are times when the replacement of a direct "no" by a reluctant "yes" will keep the communication channel open. Ueda (1974), for example, has identified 16 ways to avoid saying "no" in Japan. On the other hand, the absence of a direct "yes" in favor of an ambiguous "no" can sometimes imply modesty and politeness. Gu (1990) notes that in the Chinese culture when person A offers person B something there are two politeness phenomena: A's minimization of the cost which the offer incurs and B's

maximization of the benefit from A's offer. In other words, to maintain interpersonal harmony or to avoid hurting another's face can take precedence over the accuracy and clarity associated with verbal messages during interactions in East Asia.

Though "harmony" can explain a lot of situations in which "contrary-to-face-value" messages are used, it does not seem to be inclusive. If we look closely at the Chinese culture, we can find that other forms of CFV messages do exist. Chinese people are more likely to beat around the bush than are North Americans, but their CFV messages are not exclusively harmony-oriented. CFV messages can be applied in a quite strategic or manipulative way as well. In this study, a typology of CFV communication in the Chinese culture was proposed, with both the communicator's internal motivation and external speech being considered. The typology covers a wide range of CFV communication in a relatively parsimonious way.

TWO DIMENSIONS OF INDIRECT COMMUNICATION

A realistic way to categorize the motivation behind CFV communication is based on whether the CFV communication is self-serving or other-serving. The concepts behind other-serving CFV communication have been discussed in previous research on indirect communication (e.g., Ting-Toomey, 1985, 1988; Yum, 1988). The self-serving CFV communication is nevertheless addressed in only a few studies (e.g., Bond & Hwang, 1986; Ueda, 1974). The two are not mutually exclusive.

For example, to avoid hurting another person by using an ambiguous "yes" is primarily other-serving. If, however, at the same time a desirable relationship is maintained as the result of the CFV communication, it is self-serving too. There are also many situations in which both parties benefit from a CFV message though the speaker takes into consideration nothing more than his or her own interest. Therefore, "self-serving," as used in this study, refers to those situations in which CFV messages are primarily, but not necessarily exclusively, self-serving; whereas "other-serving" denotes those CFV messages that are essentially other-serving.

With regard to the external speech, "saying 'yes' for 'no'" and "saying 'no' for 'yes'" are the two distinctive categories of CFV communication. CFV communication varies in the style and degree of contrast between the speech and the internal reality of the speaker, however, a hidden "I do want" or "I do not want" intention is associated with it under most circumstances. For example, in the Chinese culture both of the following two statements can indirectly communicate the request, "Turn on the air-conditioner for me, please!":

1. "It's better in this room than on the outside of the building!"

2. "It's O.K., don't turn the air-conditioner on."

Although the first statement is less "contrary" to the real intention than the second, they both, in a broad sense, reflect the "saying 'no' for 'yes'" situation. The first

statement suggests that "It's still hot here though it's cooler than outside. You should know that turning on the air-conditioner will make me feel more comfortable." The second one implies that "I say 'no,' but you should know I really mean 'yes.'" In this study, the "yes" for "no" and "no" for "yes" are used to represent the two broadly defined desires.

FOUR CATEGORIES OF CFV COMMUNICATION

The two types of motivation and two patterns of speech, as previously suggested, make up a 2 X 2 form of CFV communication as follows:

1. Saying "yes" for "no" and other-serving
2. Saying "no" for "yes" and other-serving
3. Saying "yes" for "no" and self-serving
4. Saying "no" for "yes" and self-serving

Insert Table 1 about here

In other words, the four forms of CFV communication reflect various combinations of different motivations and speech patterns. Each of them can be identified in the Chinese culture.

Category I: Saying "Yes" for "No" and Other-serving

The first of the four proposed categories, "saying 'yes' for 'no' and other-serving," can best illustrate the harmony-oriented CFV communication. To avoid confrontation, direct rejection of other's proposal is discarded in favor of an

ambiguous "yes," which only means "I understand your position" or "I am listening to you." The "yes" response can take a nonverbal form, such as head-nodding, as well. Though it is generally misleading, it creates far fewer communication problems for insiders (Chinese) than for outsiders. An outsider, especially an outsider from a "low-context culture" (Hall, 1976, p. 79), will tend to take the "yes" message literally as an explicit form of agreement. However, within the Chinese culture, the authenticity of the "yes" message is usually assessed through contextual and nonverbal cues. On the surface level, an ambiguous "yes" is treated as zhi1-wu2-qi2-ci2, or "speaking ambiguously." "No" or "I'm reluctant to accept the proposal" is usually implied in it. An easy way to distinguish an authentic "yes" from a fake one is to see the level of enthusiasm associated with the "yes" message. A person who really agrees with another is likely to show a high level of enthusiasm along with the "yes" message, while a fake "yes" message tends to lack such a manifestation.

Category II: Saying "No" for "Yes" and Other-serving

While Category I covers a situation in which direct rejection was avoided, the position represented by Category II implies considerateness and politeness, or ke4-qi4[1], toward others. This category involves various social situations. The following are two examples:

Situation 1

During a dinner party, guests frequently complimented the host for the food that was served. Although the compliments were appreciated, the host replied by saying, "Oh, no, they're not well-prepared."

Situation 2

Wang offered a ride to Li since it was raining outside and Li did not have a car. Li definitely needed the ride, but replied by saying, "No, thanks. I don't want to be too much trouble for you."

In Situation 1, the host said "no" in reply to the compliments received from the guests in order to make the guests feel comfortable. A "yes" response would have implied that the host had spent many hours preparing the food, so the guests should probably feel "guilty" eating it or "owing" a lot to the host. The "no" response in Situation 2 is a sign of being considerate toward others. In other words, Li's turning down of the ride offer is for the welfare of Wang. Within the Chinese culture, the "good will" implied in the above two "no" messages can be easily detected, so the decoder is unlikely to take the words literally and terminate the compliments or ride offer.

The Chinese version of other-serving "yes" and "no" messages tends to annoy many North Americans, but East Asians seem to have less difficulty decoding these CFV messages. Authentic "yes" or "no" messages are distinguished from the

reluctant or fake ones on the basis of some contextual cues, such as the physical context in which a "yes" or "no" message is transmitted, the timing, the relationship between the two, the level of enthusiasm associated with the message, the consequences of using the authentic "yes" or "no" messages, etc.

Category III: Saying "Yes" for "No" and Self-serving

CFV communicators represented by this category are strategically conscious. It can be a simple deceptive communication. For example, in order to increase his credibility a man can lie to a woman by saying that he is going to attend an important meeting, while in fact he is not invited to any meeting. A more sophisticated case involves a person who did not want others to believe he or she was going to engage in a specific behavior. Since simply admitting or denying it would be equally risky the person decided to say "yes" (admitting that he or she would do it) in a manner or context that made others believe it was not a "yes" (he or she would not do it), zhen1-hua4-jia3-shuo1. In other words, while lying did not occur (what was said is true), the way the statement was made was strategically misleading (the way it was said made others believe the reverse would be true). For example, a woman jokingly told her boy-friend that she was dating another man in response to her boy-friend's inquiry about her romantic relationships with others. He did not take the "yes" response seriously because he thought that she would

not have admitted if she had actually dated another man. A normal response to the inquiry would have been "no," no matter whether she was dating another man. However, a "yes" for "no" response was more likely to help her accomplish the goal (to make her boy-friend believe she had no other dates).

Category IV: Say "No" for "Yes" and Self-serving

The fourth category of CFV communication involves saying "no" for "yes" for the sake of serving oneself. It can be an uncomplicated lying situation. For example, contrary to the truth, a boy said, "No, I didn't steal any money!" to avoid punishment. The category can also cover situations in which we can obtain something or gain compliance more easily by feigning disinterestedness instead of showing enthusiasm in it. Showing interest in a product, for example, may make it difficult to bargain for it. By saying, "No, I'm not interested in it," a shopper sometimes puts himself or herself in a better position for obtaining it at a reasonable price. This strategy applies to courtships as well. Sometimes, one can earn the heart of a person of opposite sex more easily by occasionally rejecting a date proposal. In Chinese, it is referred to as yu4-qin2-gu4-zong4, or "if one wants to catch somebody, he or she may need to let loose the noose for a while."

Both the third and fourth categories represent the strategic version of CFV communication, which is applied to fulfill a selfish goal hidden from the listener. They are

similar to the two "other-serving" categories in that what is communicated is contrary to or different from what is "logically" expected. However, the CFV communication under the third and fourth categories is not motivated by consideration for others or interpersonal harmony.

The typology proposed in this paper intends to cover all forms of CFV messages and offer explanations from an insider's perspective. The two "other-serving" categories can be regarded as an extreme of indirect communication, while the two "self-serving" ones reveal some forms of strategic communication employed in the Chinese culture. An underlying theme saturated in the typology is that verbal messages are not reliable in the Chinese culture. The face-value of any verbal message is not honored unless corresponding contextual cues are orchestrating.

CFV communication can be found in almost every culture. However, people in some cultures tend to adopt it more frequently than some others. Chinese people, for example, apply it extensively in their daily life, for both other-serving and self-serving purposes. Most North Americans are not used to CFV messages, so they can be easily frustrated by CFV messages, including those altruistic ones purposed to serve their interest. As intercultural communication becomes a daily phenomenon in many parts of the world, it is important to be aware of different approaches to verbal communication. Our culture makes sense of the way we communicate. Some

communication behaviors can only be justified in a specific cultural context. Just as an average North American disapproves of the use of CFV messages at a crucial moment of business, a typical Chinese complains about the nonsense of serving hors d'oeuvre to starving guests.

Footnotes

[1]The Pinyin system of romanization is used to transliterate special Chinese terms in this paper. The number immediately following each transliterated word represents the tone of the word when it is pronounced in Mandarin Chinese.

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TABLE 1

FOUR CATEGORIES OF "CONTRARY-TO-THE-FACE-VALUE" COMMUNICATION

	Saying "yes" for "no"	Saying "no" for "yes"
Other-serving	zhi1-wu2-qi2-ci2[1]	ke4-qi4[2]
Self-serving	zhen1-hua4-jia3-shuo1[3]	yu4-qin2-gu4-zong4[4]

[1]Speak ambiguously.

[2]Politely turn down other's compliments or offer in order to make him or her feel easy or not "owing" too much.

[3]Say "yes" in a manner or context that makes others believe it is not an authentic "yes."

[4]Try to gain something by feigning disinterestedness.